

Eagles from Md. sent to help establish population in Vt.

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BLACKWATER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Md.

A circling bald eagle overhead is the only sign there are babies in the nest 65 feet up a loblolly pine tree. Biologist Craig Koppie isn't sure what he'll find in the nest until he climbs, peers inside and shouts down the good news _ "Triplets!"

Koppie, an endangered species biologist for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, now has a job even trickier than climbing a tall pine in search of bald eaglets.

His mission is to get the eaglets out of the nest without damage, into a dog crate, then to Vermont, where federal wildlife officials started a project three years ago to reintroduce bald eagles in the only state in the contiguous United States without a nesting pair of the national symbol.

On the collection day last week, Koppie's job started with a little small talk. He chatters to himself as he climbs around to the 5-foot-wide nest, blabbering so that the eaglets know something is approaching. If Koppie were to sneak up quietly, the eaglets might get spooked and fall out of the nest, and they're a few weeks from learning how to fly.

Not that the baby eagles are small. Though nearly defenseless, without being able to fly or effectively use their sharp, black talons, the eaglets weigh about 8 pounds and spread their wings in alarm when Koppie climbs into their nest. Even from dozens of feet below, the size of the eaglets is imposing.

But Koppie, 51, has done this plenty of times before, so he knows the eaglets aren't much danger at less than nine weeks old. He calmly picks one up, wraps it in a towel, then puts cloth straps around the towel to make what he calls "a little straitjacket" for the bird. The eaglet, which is years away from having the bald eagles' white head, is then placed in a black duffel bag and lowered by rope to another biologist waiting on the ground.

Biologists have a small window in the spring baby season to collect the eaglets. They have to be old enough to tear their food but too young to jump out of a nest, meaning the eaglets have to be collected in their seventh or eighth weeks from nests, which are spotted by overhead airplane surveillance.

The mother eagle never approaches the nest even as her young are taken away, though she circles in the sky making a squeaky chirping sound.

"Compared to other birds of prey, eagles are pretty docile," explained Michael Amaral, a senior endangered species biologist who will take the eaglets to Addison, Vt. Despite their fearsome image, Amaral said, bald eagles are relatively easy to work with and won't attack humans climbing into one of their nests.

Amaral waits on the ground for the eaglet to be lowered, then carefully removes the towel. It's apparent the baby eagle doesn't like being moved, but it doesn't try to fly or run away. It opens its beak in a little pant but doesn't snap as Amaral and an assistant clamp metal tracking devices to its legs.

"There we go," Amaral says to the eaglet, then, metal anklets in place, he lets the eaglet sit to the side while its sibling is lowered and tagged. The third baby is left for the mother.

"We never leave a pair with an empty nest. That wouldn't be right," Koppie said. But before leaving the tree, Koppie looks up to the eagle still swooping in arcs around the nest and joked, "I just saved her a lot of headache."

Once tagged, Amaral and Koppie wrap the birds again and head to a truck with dog crates in the back. The eaglets are unwrapped into separate crates and the biologists head for the second stop of the day, an even higher nest on private property nearby.

With last week's expedition, Koppie has collected six eaglets for this year's shipment to Dead Creek State Wildlife Management Area in Vermont. There, they'll be put in what's called a "hatch box," where biologists will drop food for a few more weeks until the eaglets are ready to venture out. Volunteers watch the hatch boxes 24 hours a day to prevent raccoons or human vandals from getting to the baby eagles. But the humans are kept out of sight at all times to prevent the eagles from getting used to them.

"This is the closest they'll ever be to people," Amaral explains while tagging the eaglets.

The eagle project started three years ago at the request of retiring U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., who asked U.S. Fish & Wildlife officials what project they'd like to see funded. Biologists came up with the \$250,000, three-year plan to reintroduce bald eagles in Vermont.

Maryland was chosen as a likely place to collect eaglets because of its ample population. From an estimated 75 nesting pairs in 1977, the Chesapeake Bay region, including parts of Virginia and Delaware, now has at least 1,000 nesting pairs. That's thanks mostly to abundant waterfront habitat, Koppie said.

Since 2003, Maryland has sent 19 bald eaglets to Vermont, though not all have survived. At least one met its end from a high-speed commuter train. Others ended up settling in New York, which already had a bald eagle population.

But earlier this year, Amaral said, Vermonters got welcome news. A nesting pair was observed near the New Hampshire border along the Connecticut River, the first recorded pair in Vermont since the 1940s. Because it takes bald eagles more than three years to reach sexual maturity, biologists say the pair does not include any Maryland birds, but the news was welcome anyway.

Amaral said it wasn't clear why Vermont had no bald eagles for so long. He said the state's geography probably means bald eagles were never abundant there.

"Vermont's not exactly a water-rich state. It probably never supported a robust bald eagle population," Amaral said, pointing out that eagles seek open water, not frozen water.

The biologists believe that eventually some of the eaglets from Maryland will end up reproducing in Vermont and starting a viable, if small, population there.